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ABSTRACT

This document discusses educational reform and the implications of educational standards on students with disabilities. Topics addressed include: (1) common educational reforms; (2) new laws promoting education reform; (3) how today's reforms fit with special education; (4) the different types of standards, including content standards and performance standards; (5) standard-setting groups; and (6) issues that arise from setting standards, including how much content should be in the standards and how challenging is challenging. Issues specific to students with disabilities are highlighted, including whether students with individualized education programs (IEPs) should be exempt from meeting standards, whether there should be only one set of standards or different sets, and whether parents should be involved in making decisions about standards for students on IEPs. The merits and limitations of IEP-based standards and other different sets of standards are also identified. Recommendations are presented for enabling students with disabilities to gain maximum benefit from content and performance standards. The document closes with questions and issues that need to be addressed at the state and local level to ensure the inclusion of students with disabilities in educational reform efforts. (Contains 26 references.) (CR)

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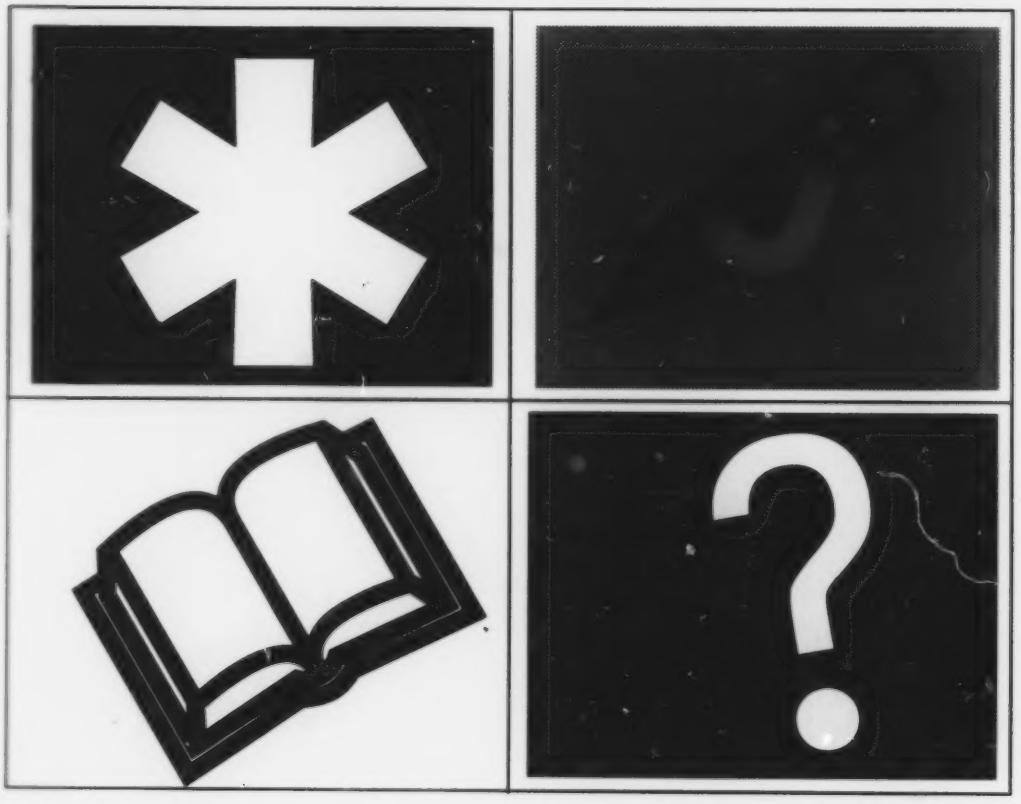
Opening the Door

to Educational Reform



Understanding Standards

EC 305944

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Preface

What is Educational Reform All About?

Reform usually means "change for the better." Today, our education system is undergoing major changes in response to concerns about its adequacy. Why are we so concerned?

- International comparisons suggest that in some areas U.S. students do not perform as well as students in many other countries.
- Colleges and universities are having to give remedial work to more and more students before they are ready for college-level classes.
- U.S. businesses have complained that high school graduates in our country do not have the skills needed to be good workers in today's global economy.

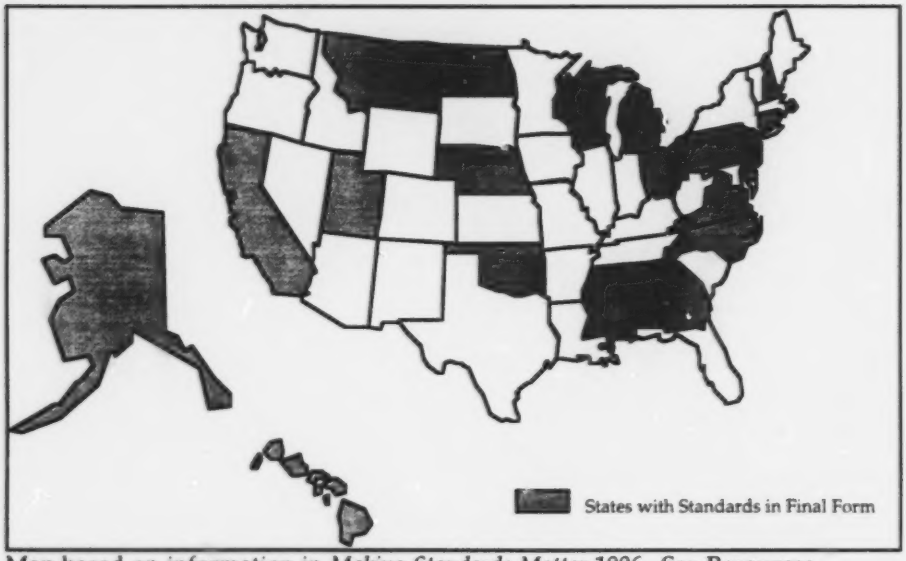
While people may disagree about whether these statements are true, most people do agree that we should support our educational system and, at the same time, push for it to improve. Thus, the American public is always interested in changing education for the better. However, policymakers, educators, and parents alike are pushing harder than usual for reforms in education. This is happening in many states and across the nation.

Educational reform has implications for students with disabilities, especially now when the focus is on producing workers who can help the United States compete in a global economy. Too often, students with disabilities are not considered in discussions of educational reform. Yet, we want all individuals to be contributing members of our society, including those with disabilities. We want our educational system to be **accountable** for all children.

What are Some Common Educational Reforms?

There are many reforms in the news today. Most of them are said to be "systemic" -- occurring throughout the education system. Systemic reform can occur in local schools, school districts, or states. You may have heard about site-based management, cooperative learning, teaming, collaboration, and other reform strategies. While many reforms are being promoted, different people push different reforms because they disagree about which are the best approaches. Yet there remains a strong push for schools to help students learn to a high academic levels -- to **challenging standards**. Schools show that their students meet these challenging standards through assessments that now are more varied and real-world based, and that produce richer information about student learning. These efforts are now included in several federal

education laws and in the education laws of many states. They have significant implications for students with disabilities.



Map based on information in *Making Standards Matter 1996*. See Resources.

What New Laws Promote Educational Reform?

Three federal education laws enacted in 1993 and 1994 are important steps toward helping states in their reform efforts: *Goals 2000: Educate America Act, Improving America's Schools Act,* and the *School to Work Opportunities Act.*

***Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (Public Law 103-227).** *Goals 2000* was signed on March 31, 1994. It provides money to states for school reform. It encourages setting high standards of learning for students and using better assessments to evaluate progress toward meeting the standards. *Goals 2000* is very clear in its definition of "all students" and in the requirement that students with disabilities be considered in all aspects of educational reform.

Goals 2000 identifies eight national education goals that are designed to include **all** students. These goals are to be reached by the year 2000:

(1) SCHOOL READINESS – All children in America will start school ready to learn.

(2) SCHOOL COMPLETION – The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.

(3) STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND CITIZENSHIP – All students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our Nation's modern economy.

(4) TEACHER EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT – The Nation's teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century.

(5) MATHEMATICS AND SCIENCE – United States students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.

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(6) ADULT LITERACY AND LIFELONG LEARNING -- Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

(7) SAFE, DISCIPLINED, AND ALCOHOL- AND DRUG-FREE SCHOOLS -- Every school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

(8) PARENTAL PARTICIPATION -- Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.

"All students" is specifically defined in *Goals 2000* as "students . . . from a broad range of backgrounds and circumstances, including . . . students . . . with disabilities, limited-English proficiency, [dropouts], migratory students . . ., and academically talented students and children"

***Improving America's Schools Act* (Public Law 103-382).** This used to be the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, but was revised and signed into law on October 20, 1994. *IASA* authorizes funding for Title I programs (what used to be called Chapter 1 programs).

Title I programs assist students by providing extra help in math and reading. If states have already developed new "challenging standards" in math and reading, perhaps in order to receive *Goals 2000* monies, they can use those same standards to get Title I money. If a state is not developing standards for *Goals 2000* monies, it still has to develop new challenging standards in reading and math to get Title I funds through *IASA*.. Like *Goals 2000* the *Improving America's Schools Act* clarifies that *IASA* money is for all students.

The *Improving America's Schools Act* promotes schoolwide reform strategies that:

(i) Provide opportunities for all children to meet the State's proficient and advanced levels of student performance

(ii) Are based on effective means of improving the achievement of children

(iii) Use effective instructional strategies, . . . that (I) increase the amount and quality of learning time, . . .(II) include strategies for meeting the educational needs of historically underserved populations, . . .

(iv) (I) address the needs of all children in the school . . . (II) address how the school will determine if such needs have been met . . . .

(vii) Are consistent with, and designed to implement, the State and local improvement plans, if any, approved under title III of Goals 2000: Educate America Act.

***School to Work Opportunities Act* (Public Law 103-239).** The critical time of transition from school to work is the target of this national education law, signed on May 4, 1994. The intent of the law is to help schools combine classroom lessons and workplace training. As with *Goals 2000* and *IASA*, this law makes it clear that students with disabilities are to be included in the initiatives undertaken under its funding.

The purposes of the *School to Work Opportunities Act* are:

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(1) to establish a national framework within which all States can create statewide School-to-Work Opportunities systems

(2) to facilitate the creation of a universal, high-quality school-to-work transition system that enables youths in the United States to identify and navigate paths to productive and progressively more rewarding roles in the workplace

(3) to utilize workplaces as active learning environments in the educational process by making employers joint partners with educators in providing opportunities for all students to participate in high-quality, work-based learning experiences

(4) to use Federal funds under this Act as venture capital, to underwrite the initial costs of planning and establishing statewide School-to-Work Opportunities systems that will be maintained with other Federal, State, and local resources . . . .

(11) to motivate all youths, including low-achieving youths, school dropouts, and youths with disabilities, to stay in or return to school or a classroom setting and strive to succeed, by providing enriched learning experiences and assistance in obtaining good jobs and continuing their education in postsecondary educational institutions

(12) to increase opportunities for minorities, women, and individuals with disabilities, by enabling individuals to prepare for careers that are not traditional for their race, gender, or disability

In the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, the term "all students" means "both male and female students from a broad range of backgrounds and circumstances, including . . . students with disabilities . . .

How Do Today's Reforms Fit with Special Education?

We are beginning to see some of the ways today's school reforms affect students who receive special education services. Before this, special education services were evaluated in terms of the extent to which school districts offering those services complied with requirements of special education law. Compliance meant that students were assessed in a timely manner, that services were provided in an appropriate setting, and that the need for services and the type of services were re-evaluated annually. Special education services were not evaluated on the basis of results achieved by the students receiving services.

The compliance-based approach to special education evaluation is different from the results-based approach being pursued in the general education reforms of today. It is no longer acceptable to simply ask "are students getting the services indicated on their Individual Education Program?" We must ask "are they learning?" Therein lies the difference between compliance-based and results-based approaches to reform. Reforms of today, the ones that are to bring us into the 21st century, are based on **world-class standards** and **assessments**.

Many questions are raised when we talk about systemic reforms and students with disabilities. For example:

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- Can students with disabilities be included in general education reforms while still preserving what is "special" in special education?

- Can we focus more on the results of education and still protect compliance and procedural safeguards?

- Can education be individualized to the needs of students and still be oriented toward the achievement of high standards?

- Are there assessments that can measure the progress of students with disabilities in the same way that they measure the progress of students without disabilities?

These and many other questions deserve discussion and resolution in a way that ensures that students with disabilities are not left behind.

Educational standards are touted repeatedly in discussions of educational reform. We need our schools to reach higher standards of excellence, so that students can be held to challenging, world-class standards. What does this mean? What are the implications of standards for students with disabilities? These and other questions are the focus of this document.

Educational Standards

What Are Standards?

Standards tell us what students are expected to know and do. They also provide us with a systemic way to evaluate the results of educational progress. There are many different types of standards. In education today, the two types of standards discussed most often are:

- Content Standards
- Performance Standards

Content standards are what students should know and be able to do. The *knowledge* (concepts, ideas, issues) and *skills* (thinking, analyzing, communicating, reasoning) are what should be obtained as a result of exposure to a curriculum. Sometimes content standards are called "curriculum standards" because of this relationship. In general, content standards are the broad or overall goals of student learning.

Performance standards are what students need to do or show to provide evidence that they can actually use and apply the knowledge and skills they have learned. Performance standards describe how and to what degree a student must perform in order to demonstrate learning has taken place.

Examples of Content and Performance Standards from the National Assessment of Educational Progress Writing Portfolio

Content Standard	Performance Standard (Highest Level)
Student is able to produce an example of narrative writing.	**Elaborated Story.** Paper describes a sequence of episodes in which almost all story elements are well developed (i.e., setting, episodes, characters' goals, or problems to be solved). The resolution of the goals or problems at the end are elaborated. The events are presented and elaborated in a cohesive way.
Student is able to produce an example of informative writing.	**Elaborated Discussion.** Paper includes a broad range of information or ideas and establishes more than one kind of relationship using rhetorical devices . . . Information, ideas and relationships are explained and supported. The paper has a coherent sense of purpose and audience. . . .
Student is able to produce an example of persuasive writing.	**Elaborated Argument.** Paper states an opinion and reasons to support the opinion. It also presents well-developed explanations in support of the argument. It demonstrates an awareness of audience through the use of voice and/or selection of effective supporting details. It may contain a summary and refutation of the opposite point of view.

What does it mean when people talk about **challenging, world class** standards? What makes a standard challenging? What makes a standard world class? Are challenging world class standards the same for a student with a disability as for a student without a disability? Is everyone expected to learn and do the same things, or can everyone meet a high standard in different ways? These are some of the questions that need to be answered.

Why Have Standards Become So Important to Reform?

When school systems decide that they want to improve the achievement of their students, they need something against which to measure the students' performance. What should students know and be able to do to be considered successful? Standards provide the measures needed to document progress.

> *"The process of developing content standards is a community-wide effort to review, rethink, and re-establish the most important skills and knowledge -- from the basics to more complex skills and knowledge. . . . Standards help create a common core of learning and some comparability from community to community. . . . The development of content standards is part of a long overdue discussion about what is important -- about what every public school student should be learning."*
>
> From **Communicating with the Public about Education Reform,** National Governors' Association, p. 5.

Standards are for all students--not just students without disabilities. The goal of expecting all students to meet high standards has led to much controversy. Some argue that the standards will need to be "watered down." Watering down standards is also referred to as "dumbing down" the curriculum.

Participating in discussions about standards will have an impact on the education of students with disabilities. How to get involved is addressed later in this document.

Who is Setting Standards?

Several groups are setting standards. For example, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics proposed math standards. The National Association of Sport and Physical Education is developing physical education standards. The national groups that are setting standards are producing resources that can be used by states and educational systems to identify and/or revise standards.

Some of the standards-setting groups have made the news. The English Language Arts group was chastised for being slow in developing its standards, and for having produced vague standards. Their funding was withdrawn in 1994, and a revised effort initiated soon afterward. The History Standards were attacked by some groups for presenting a biased view of history. Controversy has surrounded some standards-setting groups, while others have set standards that have been praised. For example, the math standards set by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics are still viewed as a model of what standards-setting is about.

Professional Standards-Setting Groups		
Arts Music Educators National Conference 1806 Robert Fulton Drive Reston, VA 22091 **Civics and Government** Center for Civic Education 5146 Douglas Fir Road Calabasas, CA 91302 **Economics** National Council on Economic Education 432 Park Avenue South New York, NY 10016 **English/Language Arts** National Council Teachers of English 1111 W. Kenyon Road Urbana, IL 61801 International Reading Association 800 Barksdale Road P.O. Box 8139 Newark, NJ 19711	**Foreign Language** American Council Teaching of Foreign Languages 6 Executive Plaza Yonkers, NY 10701 **Geography** National Council Geographic Education 1600 M St. NW, Suite 4200 Washington, DC 20036 **History** National Center History in Schools Univ of California at LA 10880 Wilshire Blvd. Suite 1610 Los Angeles, CA 90024 **Physical Education** National Association Sport & Physical Education 1900 Association Drive Reston, VA 22091	**Science** National Academy of Sciences National Research Council 2101 Constitution Ave NW Washington, DC 20418 American Association for Advancement of Science 1333 H Street NW Washington, DC 20005 National Science Teachers Association 1840 Wilson Blvd. Second Floor Arlington, VA 22201 **Social Studies** National Council Social Studies 3501 Newark St., NW Washington, DC 20016

Those setting standards typically are working on content standards. These groups almost always say that the standards are for ***all*** students. Yet, for the most part, the standards-setting groups have not been very concerned about including individuals with disabilities. They often have not even worried about consulting with individuals who are familiar with the issues faced by people with disabilities. They consider students with disabilities to be a "special interest group."

States are also setting standards. In the past, they have referred to them as state goals, curriculum frameworks or learner outcomes. States, in general, have gone about setting goals (content standards) without generating as much controversy as the national associations. And, states have used different strategies in developing their goals. More states now are revising previous goals and calling them standards.

State Terms for "Standards"

State	Term	State	Term
AL	Courses of Study	MT	Learner Goals
AK	Student Performance Standards	NE	Curriculum Frameworks
AZ	Essential Skills	NV	Courses of Study
AR	Curriculum Frameworks	NH	Curriculum Frameworks
CA	Curriculum Frameworks	NJ	Core Curriculum Standards
CO	Content Standards	NM	Competency Frameworks
CT	Guides to Curriculum Development	NY	Curriculum Frameworks
DE	Content Standards	NC	Standard Course of Study
FL	Curriculum Frameworks	ND	Curriculum Frameworks
GA	Quality Core Curriculum	OH	Curriculum Frameworks
HI	Content, Performance Standards	OK	Priority Academic Student Skills
ID	Curriculum Frameworks	OR	Content Standards
IL	Academic Standards	PA	Student Learning Outcomes
IN	Content, Performance Standards	RI	Curriculum Frameworks
IA	Student Achievement Goals	SC	Curriculum Frameworks
KS	Curriculum Frameworks	SD	Benchmarks
KY	Academic Expectations	TN	Curriculum Frameworks
LA	State Curriculum Guides	TX	Essential Elements
ME	Learning Results	UT	State Core Curriculum
MD	Learning Outcomes	VT	Content Standards
MA	Curriculum Frameworks	VA	Standards of Learning
MI	Content Standards	WA	Essential Academic Learning
MN	Basic Requirements, Profile of Learning	WV	Programs of Study
MS	Curriculum Structure	WI	Content, Performance Standards
MO	Curriculum Frameworks	WY	Common Core of Knowledge

From: "Struggling for Standards" (Special Report). (1995, April 12). Education Week, 14 (29), pp. 1-70.

What Issues Arise from Setting Standards?

There are many general issues that arise when thinking about educational standards, without even considering what they mean for special groups of students. That is probably the reason why many reports have been written just to address some of these issues. The Resources section includes several available reports on standards, including *Raising Standards for American Education, Promises to Keep, High Standards for All, Front-End Alignment,* and *Making Standards Matter.* Most questions about standards address their purpose or scope, and their implications for instruction.

What Should the Standards Be? How Do We Know? A basic question is, "How do we know when we have set the right standards?" In most cases, the decision has been made that the standards need to be set by a group of individuals who are experts in the field of interest. This means that standards are usually set by groups of mathematicians, geographers, scientists, or whatever the content area of interest.

But, every so often, someone still asks how we can be sure that the standards set by these groups are really the right ones. How do we really know what the critical information is that needs to be learned? And, once we can agree that we have identified the critical information to learn, how do we know what the level of performance should be? People continue to struggle with these issues.

Two groups that have tried to say what makes good content standards are the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Goals Panel. It is obvious from their criteria that there is lots of room for disagreement.

Criteria Used to Evaluate State Standards	
American Federation of Teachers	**National Education Goals Panel**
State standards are based in the core academic subjects State standards are specific enough to establish a common core curriculum State student assessments are aligned to the standards Students have to meet the standards to graduate State standards are benchmarked to world class levels	State standards are as rigorous as national subject-specific standards, and held to the same criteria State standards are feasible, delimited, and focused so that they can be implemented in the schools State standards are cumulatively adequate to give all students the knowledge, skills, and habits needed to succeed in work and to further their own learning State standards encourage students to integrate and apply knowledge and skills from various subjects State standards are reflective of a consensus-building process
From: *Making Standards Matter : A Fifty State Progress Report on Efforts to Raise Academic Standards* (1995). See Resources.	From: *Promises to Keep: Creating High Standards for American Students* (1993). See Resources.

Too Much Content? Too Little Knowledge? Some people argue that we should not be identifying lists of standards in different content areas. It is not enough to encourage students to integrate and apply knowledge and skills from various subject areas. Instead, we should be producing standards that reflect integrated knowledge and skills. Part of the reason for this suggestion is that so much content is being identified that no student could possibly learn it all.

How Challenging is Challenging? Much debate and controversy have followed statements like "standards are for all children" and "all children can learn." Some people have argued that in order for standards to be appropriate for all students, there will have to be a *lowering of expectations*, to where the expectations are *watered down* and *minimal*. There will have to be a *dumbing down* of the standards.

The response to these charges has been that standards do not have to be lowered to be for all students. All children can reach higher levels of learning.

> *"Does the slogan 'all children can learn' mean that the curriculum will be dumbed down, that bright kids will be held back until the slowest student catches up? No, it means that all children have the capacity to learn, and that no child should be thrown on the ash heap and treated as a dummy. It means that given enough time, all children can reach to higher levels of learning than children presently achieve. It means that if we expect more, we will get more. It does not mean that all children should be taught at the same pace; some children learn faster than others, and they should move forward more quickly so they don't get bored. Every nation in the world has a spread of student achievement, with some students at the bottom and others at the top. Our goal must be to raise achievement for all students, while narrowing the range from top to bottom.. This does not mean dragging down the students at the top, but expecting more of all students, especially those who are in the bottom half."*
>
> From "Standards, Yes -- But Put Resources Behind Them" in **American School Board Journal**, 1993, vol 180, p. 38.

Are Standards the Same as Outcome-Based Education (OBE)? Standards are not the same as OBE. OBE has received widespread attention in the news, with protests from some parents worried about what it means for their own children. Outcome-based education is an instructional approach that is distinct from standards. The focus of OBE is on the methods used to produced desired outcomes. These have been controversial.

What are Opportunity to Learn Standards?--Questions of Access and Equity. Another type of standard that has raised controversy are opportunity-to-learn standards. Unfortunately, opportunity-to -learn standards have not received as much visibility as content and performance standards. Including opportunity-to-learn standards in reform efforts raises issues of educational access and equity for all students.

In order to meet content and performance standards, students first must be taught. If a student is not in a science class, it is unfair to hold that student responsible for science standards. If a student is in a math class that never gets beyond algebra, it is not fair to hold that student responsible for mastering the concepts of geometry and calculus. If one student has a foreign language teacher who has been to the country of the language being taught, and has many tapes and supplementary materials to use in instruction, and another student has a teacher who has never been to another country and has no supplemental materials to use when teaching the foreign language, have the two students had equitable foreign language instruction? These are the kinds of access and equity issues that arise when thinking about standards.

Some people argue that it is just as important to set standards for the delivery of education as it is to set standards for the results of instruction. These standards have been called both service delivery standards and opportunity-to-learn standards. Others argue that it is necessary to look at the conditions of learning only if the results are not what you want. There are no easy solutions to these kinds of issues.

What Are the Issues for Students with Disabilities?

Many additional questions arise when considering standards and students with disabilities. Parents of students with disabilities have said that they want their children to be held to high standards. But there are questions about what this means. For example, some of the questions that arise are:

- Should students with IEPs be exempted from meeting standards?
- Should there be only one set of standards, or different sets?
- Should parents be involved in making decisions about standards for students on IEPs?

Many people say that **standards should not be thought of as requiring equal achievement of all students**. What they require is **higher achievement of all students**.

Exempting Students with IEPs. Exempting students with IEPs from standards of any type is probably not a good idea. When students are exempted, it usually is interpreted to mean that it is not necessary to think about them in this context. But that simply should not be the case when we are talking about what students are to know and be able to do.

It is important to address head on the implications of exemptions from standards by asking questions like:

- Do some students on IEPs need to know this?
- Is there some way that a student on an IEP can show achievement of these standards?
- Does an exemption from a content standard really mean that a student will receive no instruction at all related to the standard?
- What are the actual consequences of being exempted from or not exempted from a standard?

It is extremely important to think through the consequences of exemption from standards. Exploration of other approaches is worthwhile.

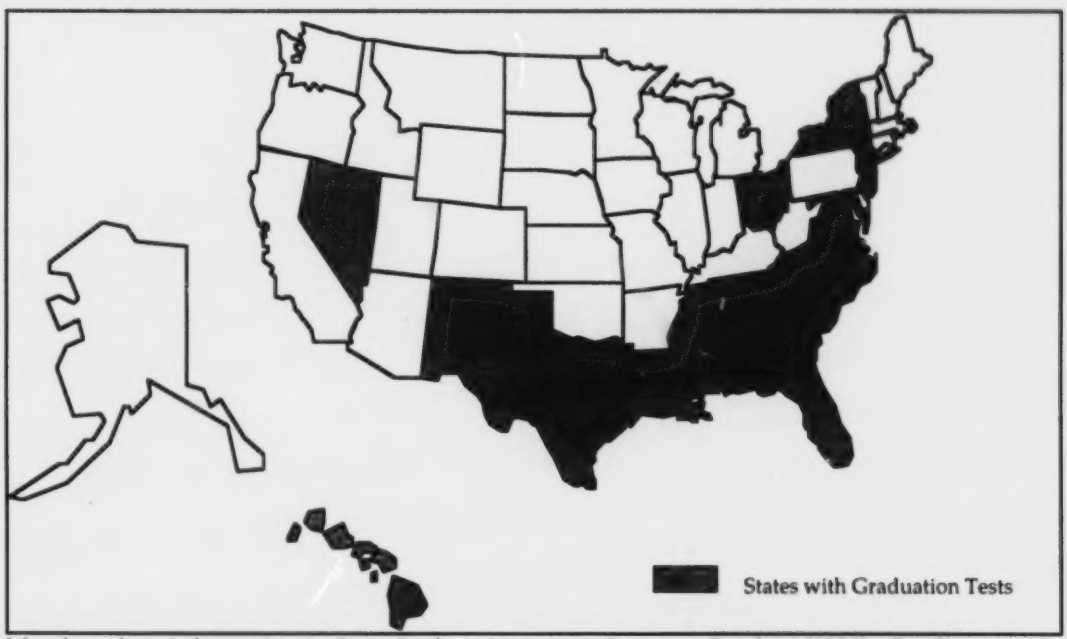
The Same or Different Standards? Reasonable arguments can be made for either position. Similarly, there are drawbacks to both positions. Instead of exempting students from standards, we could either hold them to the same standards, or hold them to a different set of standards.

Same standards. When standards are set for the purpose of keeping track of how students are doing, without consequences for the students, it is reasonable to strive for the same standards for all students. Then, we have a true picture of how all students

perform relative to the standards. We would expect a range of performance, and this is what we would find if all students are included. Of course, how performance is assessed is another important consideration (see *Understanding Educational Assessment and Accountability*).

Different standards. There are a number of ways that different standards could be developed. Some states are identifying a different set of standards according to the disability of the student. Thus, students who have hearing impairments have a different set of standards to meet from the set that students with mental retardation have to meet, which also are different from the set that students with emotional disabilities have to meet, and so on.

Some states have decided that all students who want to earn a high school graduation diploma must meet the same standards. Other students can meet different standards in order to earn a certificate of completion or a certificate of attendance. These kinds of consequences have important implications for the life outcomes of individuals. The consequences are considered to be high stakes for the student because having a diploma rather than a certificate can mean the difference between obtaining a job and not obtaining a job.



Map based on information in *State Student Assessment Programs Database* (1996). See Resources.

IEP-based standards. Another approach that relies on different standards is one that uses the IEP as the basis for requirements. The IEP could become a vehicle for outcomes accountability in this way. For example, the goals and objectives might be translated into relevant outcomes that match those of the school district or state. The assessment/evaluation component may help define acceptable performance. Developing **IEP-based standards** has both merits and limitations. Among the merits are:

- They use an existing, familiar document.
- They eliminate another layer of paperwork.
- By using the concept of "personal best," they correspond with the individualization sought for students on IEPs.
- IEP procedures require input from parents and students, a procedural component that increases the possibility of realistic goals and expectations.
- IEPs are already the basis for reporting to state and federal governments.

Among the limitations of IEP-based standards are:

- Adding to or changing the format might further increase the variability of IEPs that already are highly variable in quality.
- Low standards might be set for students, with the rationalization that they should not experience failure.
- Monitoring IEPs would become even more difficult for monitors, and probably would require new skills and criteria.
- It would be difficult to combine data from the IEPs of several students. Standards are being set so that there is something against which to measure progress of groups of students.

All of these factors need to be considered. Perhaps this approach is reasonable for some students but not for others. For example, students whose curriculum is different from the mainstream (for example, focusing on self-care skills rather than academic skills) might be held to different standards.

Identifying a **different set of standards** for some students has certain merits. Among them are:

- They would be better aligned to students' particular needs
- They might help identify a realistic set of goals or competencies
- They could be organized around concepts such as communication, functional literacy, and job/employability skills rather than academic content areas.

There are several limitations to this approach that need to be considered. Among these are:

- Expectations may be lowered for students with disabilities.
- Separate standards might legitimize using a less rigorous approach with students with disabilities.
- Separate standards might narrow curricular choices.
- Educators will have a more difficult time making comparisons in progress with the general population of students.
- Separate standards might inhibit achievement and lower the self esteem of students with disabilities.

It is not a simple matter to say that students with disabilities need different standards. And, the consequences are not straightforward either. In some cases, people have found that when students with disabilities are exempted from standards, but are still entitled to earn a regular diploma, there are many more requests for special education services, a consequence that burdens the special education system because of the need for more student evaluations and meetings than would otherwise be necessary.

What Can be Done for Students with Disabilities to Gain Maximum Benefit from Standards?

It is important to have the opportunity to make decisions about standards and how students with disabilities will fit into the standards movement. Nationally, the push has been to have all students held to high standards. This is important. It requires that states and districts determine how the involvement of students with disabilities will play out in specific situations.

One suggestion is to think about content standards and performance standards separately. For **content standards**, we would recommend the following:

- Identify one set of broad standards.
- Individualize the standards when they are translated into curricular and instructional programs for students receiving special education services.
- Specify the depth and breadth of instruction for each standard. Continue to strive for the highest level of standards possible.
- Require parent/guardian approval. The ways in which standards are addressed should be specified in writing and parent approval for the departures from the traditional approach to standards designated by signature.

In terms of performance standards, we recommend the following approaches:

- All students must be assessed for progress in performance.
- Accommodations should be used during assessments.
- If individual student performance is of high stakes to the student (for example, determines whether a diploma is received), then a diploma could be awarded, but with documentation that the assessment was not passed.

This is just one set of recommendations. It is important for a group of local stakeholders to participate actively in a process of identifying and/or revising standards and measuring progress toward them at the school district and state levels.

What Can I Do About Standards?

Federally Funded Activities. There are several options addressing the issues surrounding standards and students with disabilities. One is to find out what your state is doing for *Goals 2000, IASA,* or *School to Work* funds. Is your state involved in *Goals 2000* planning? If you do not know, find out. Is your state applying for *IASA* funds? If you do not know, find out. Is your state applying for *School to Work* funds? If you do not know, find out. Get involved in these activities. Another option is to find out what your state or local district may be doing independent of federal funding. Get involved in these activities. A third option is to find out what is happening for individual students. There are several questions that can be addressed during IEP meetings, whether you are in the role of parent, teacher, or administrator. Begin to ask questions. Once you know about the activities in which your state is involved, find out the name of a contact person. Ask about who is involved in planning activities, specifically asking for people familiar with disability issues.

Ask how students with disabilities are being considered in what is being done. Get specific plans that address issues students with disabilities face. Bring together other people who would be interested and discuss what you have discovered. Discuss whether your concerns and their concerns are being addressed. Write a letter or call to express the concerns you and others have.

Even if your state is not involved in requesting funding for one of the new federal education laws, it is likely that it is involved in some way in educational reform. Find out what is happening. Then begin to ask questions about what the reform initiatives mean for students with disabilities. Relevant questions include:

- Does it specifically include or exclude students with disabilities?
- Does it indicate specifically how reform activities will influence students with disabilities?

- Does it identify how the effects of the reform will be evaluated? And, will the evaluation include students with disabilities?

- Are there any ways in which the reform could have unexpected consequences for students with disabilities, or for the special education system?

Even if your state is not specifically engaged in an educational reform activity, it most likely has a set of goals already in place. Sometimes these are called learning expectations, standards, or outcomes. They define what the state sees as its responsibilities when educating students. Ask questions about these standards.

- Is it stated somewhere that they are for all students?

- Do the standards make sense for students with disabilities?

- Are evaluation strategies identified, and do they encompass students with disabilities?

Local Education System. These and other questions are relevant to ask of our educational systems, regardless of the level of the system we are addressing. Thus, the questions that are asked of the state educational system can also be asked of the local educational system.

IEP Meetings. It is at the individual student's IEP meeting that the most meaningful questions can be asked about standards. Among the relevant questions are the following:

- What is the curriculum of this student? Who decided what it is? Is the curriculum for this student the same as the curriculum of students not receiving special education services?

  Note: If a student's curriculum is the same as that of most students, that student should be working toward the same set of standards. Depending on the student's skills, this may apply in one content area but not others. If the student's curriculum is different, the student may need to be working to meet standards in a different way.

- What accommodations or adaptations will be made in instruction to help the student achieve the identified standards?

  Note: It will be important to consider those accommodations and adaptations that lead to equal opportunities to respond. Accommodations and adaptations are for equity, not for advantage. Consideration of the kinds of accommodations provided in the workplace and by society is helpful.

There are many more questions that need to be asked during IEP meetings. Most of these questions are about the **assessment** of standards (see companion paper *"Understanding Educational Assessment and Accountability"*).

Some Final Words

While "standards" may seem like something unrelated to what is going on in your local school, this is not true. Decisions about what students need to know and be able to do are at the core of a wide range of educational decisions that have a direct impact on all students. It is critical that discussion include the wide range of students in our schools, including students with disabilities.

Resources

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